Chapter 16

Restorative and Conflict Resolution Interventions

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Abstract

Conflicts between peers are inevitable in schools, and schools must be equipped with strategies to assist students in avoiding conflicts and engaging in problem-solving when conflicts occur. Restorative practices and other conflict resolution interventions such as peer mediation are gaining popularity, particularly as an alternate framework to the overutilization of disciplinary punishment with ethnic minority students. This chapter discusses the effective use of restorative practices and conflict resolution interventions, with an emphasis on establishing these types of practices in schools using best practices.

Keywords: Restorative practice, Conflict resolution, School interventions

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Humans, as social animals, have developed a broad spectrum of strategies for maintaining order. At one extreme are formal, institutionalized, and directive systems of externally imposed rules and punishments enforced by a small number of individuals delegated the authority to do so—approaches often associated with rigidly hierarchical or authoritarian organizations. At the other are relatively organic, decentralized, or even ad-hoc efforts to establish community, facilitate the resolution of conflicts when they arise, repair the harms that precipitated or were caused by the conflicts, and ultimately reestablish community relations disrupted by them—strategies common in informal gatherings and egalitarian groups.

Even within the same building, school discipline policies and practices fall all along this spectrum. Administrators and teachers may endorse and establish relatively punitive or preventative approaches to creating and preserving a safe environment, with little consistency existing from classroom to classroom (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Students may be automatically suspended or expelled for serious or trivial violations of zero-tolerance policies (Girvan, 2019), provided additional support and the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, or simply find the space and time to talk with each other, often with peer support, to raise concerns, make amends, and restore their own friendships (Morril & Musheno, 2018).

This chapter focuses on the application of Peer-Mediated Interventions that attempt to capture the relational emphasis of the latter part of the spectrum in formal discipline systems associated with the former: Those derived from conflict resolution theory and restorative practices. It begins with a brief definition of restorative practices, their contemporary history as deliberate school-discipline interventions, and a description of how they can operate in the context of multi-tiered systems of support. It then describes main lessons learned from practical

application of the approaches in schools. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of considerations of equity in implementation of restorative practices.

History and Description of Restorative Approaches in Schools

Systems of restorative justice – those with a primary objective of responding to and repairing harm to individuals rather than exacting punishments for rule breaking – date back to antiquity (Braithwaite, 1999; Zehr, 2015). However, recognition of restorative justice as an innovative practice that could be incorporated into Western criminal justice systems did not occur until the mid-1970s and 1980s (Zehr, 2015). By 1989, for example, New Zealand had substantially transformed the core of its juvenile justice system to emphasize a restorative, rather than punitive philosophy (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005). Australia (Payne & Welch, 2015), the UK (Hopkins, 2002), and the US (Gonzales, 2012) later made similar changes. For their part, schools began incorporating the principles of restorative justice in their discipline policies and practices in the 1990s and 2000s (Hopkins, 2002; Morrison, 2002) in response to increased concerns about issues like bullying and harassment, disengagement from school, and excessive and disproportionate applications of exclusionary discipline to racial and ethnic minority students (Kehoe, Bourke-Taylor, Broderick, 2018; Mansfield, Fowler, & Rainbolt, 2018; Nese, Bastable, Gion, Massar, Nese, & McKroskey, In press).

Restorative practices represent the transformation of restorative justice to the school system. By definition, restorative practices provide a framework for responding to unwanted behaviors through the process of building community, dialogue, and mutual respect amongst students and educators. Some common applications of restorative practices in schools include:

Restorative circles. A meeting of students and educators in a circle, to discuss group norms, concerns, and reflect on current issues or repair relationships and conflict. In general, the

procedures for restorative circles include allowing one person to talk at a time with a "talking piece", and encouraging equal voice talk time.

Restorative chats. Guided conversations with the individuals involved where the focus is on identifying the area that individuals are making amends over, what they learned about how it made them and others feel, what they will do in the future to prevent the same issue from occurring, and how they will handle it differently if it does occur.

Classroom Agreements. A process of developing class-wide expectations or norms for how students and educators will treat one another, how they will work together and problem solve around issues and concerns, and what they expect from one another. These agreements are cooperatively developed *with* the students, to increase a sense of ownership over their classroom culture.

Figure 1 provides a few more common examples of such practices in the context of an education model involving multi-tiered systems of supports. The examples are organized into major components of restorative practice implementations: Explicit initial and supplemental instruction in the theory behind and goals of restorative approaches and the skills necessary to enact them; specific efforts to build, maintain, and repair relationships; and informal and formal processes for taking collective responsibility for defining community expectations and redressing harm. The next section of this chapter focuses on the critical role that students play in the buy-in, implementation, and ownership of such restorative approaches in their school buildings.

Peer Meditation in Restorative Practices Implementation

Peer involvement is both a necessary and core component of restorative practices in schools (Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007). Research suggests that peers can effectively support the development of prosocial skills amongst their classmates, by helping other students

engage more actively in instructional tasks through tutoring, attend more consistently to the classroom expectations via group contingencies, and make instruction more explicit via peer modeling and feedback (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997; Johnson & Street, 2013; Kohler & Strain, 1990; Simonsen et al., 2008). Peer mediated strategies have been associated with positive changes in peer-peer relationships (relationship repair; Kehoe et al., 2018), student-teacher relationships (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, Gerewitz, 2014; Syrjalainen et al., 2015), school climate (connectedness; Gregory et al., 2014), and more general social skills needed to successfully navigate life beyond school (Kim & Mabourgne, 2003). Additionally, peer cooperation is required for successful restorative circles, restorative chats, and classroom agreements. Without students communicating and helping to mediate their own conflict, restorative practices will be less powerful and thus, effective.

Implementing peer mediated practices also presents its own challenges. Most students in schools with more traditional discipline systems are not familiar with restorative approaches and are unsure, or even distrusting, of them. Prior to students explaining, modeling, or using restorative practices, or themselves facilitating formal processes such as circles (i.e., structured, formal, safe opportunities for sharing, discussion, and problem-solving), they need to develop the skills and confidence necessary to do so. Also, it is important to not *require* student/peer participation which can quickly turn into a power struggle and can deteriorate relationships, rather than build them. Once these skills are taught, modeled and practiced by all students in relatively safe settings, such as proactive relationship building exercises, they can become more comfortable in the practices thus resulting in more confidence to take the lead and facilitate their own processes.

Take Implementation Slow

Decisions to adopt new processes are often met with excitement and determination to implement everything immediately school or district wide. This does not allow room for those teachers who, like some students, are resistant to implementation due lack of understanding, frustration with program overload, or initiative fatigue to have concerns addressed and buy into the process. Accordingly, full implementation seldom is as effective as a "slow-grow" implementation process.

Slow implementation involves selecting a pilot group of teachers who have expressed interest in the restorative practices, and are willing and able to implement them (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Selecting the pilot teachers across grade levels minimizes the criticism that the new systems are only for a certain grade level, provides some opportunity for continuity for students, and provides a way to learn about differences and adjustments that may be needed to match practices with student development (Fixsen et al., 2005). As the pilot teachers become proficient and comfortable with restorative practices, it is important to allow other teachers to participate in the practices. Once teachers have been exposed to the process and provided additional training, the school administrator can then decide to expand the work with another small cohort of teachers interested in implementing restorative practices. Over time, the administrator can layer on more teachers to implement every year until the entire school staff are implementing. The administrator may also decide to have the entire school staff implement after the first group of pilot teachers. Whatever is decided, the pilot teachers become the restorative practices coaches to support the school or district with expanding this work.

Develop Basic Skills and Common Language

Before jumping into formal restorative practices such as restorative circles, common language needs to be established amongst students and school staff. Instruction around important

communication skills, such as affective statements, coupled with practice developing agreements and norms or expectations, is one way to start this. Affective statements, or "I" statements, are a specific format to communicate feelings that emphasize connections between specific behaviors and responses to them: "I felt happy when you told me I did a great job on my math test this morning." Staff members should not only teach the use of affective statements, but also model their use consistently with parents, students, and colleagues. In doing so, they can send information regarding the use of affective statements home to assist in informing families regarding the use of various restorative discipline practices, as well as foster the use of strong relational skills across multiple settings.

Similarly, it is beneficial for teachers to work collaboratively with their students from the outset on developing classroom agreements. These are social contracts in which each class defines what they as a classroom community find valuable in developing and maintaining strong relationships (Clifford, 2015). The agreements will ultimately define the specifics of how all members of the classroom, including staff, will interact with each other. It is also vital that the norms developed by the class are aligned with the school-wide behavioral norms and expectations to assist with generalization across different settings within their school (Clifford, 2015). Once norms are established, circles can be used proactively and routinely for low-stakes check-ins, relationship building, discussion, or even instruction to ensure that students and teachers understand how circles work before they are used for higher-stakes problem-solving and responses to particular incidents involving harm (Clifford, 2015).

Increasing Sustainability

Even teachers who have a strong desire to use restorative practices, including circles, in class feel the stress of "too much to do and not enough time to do it." The most successful

models of implementation are those where administrators are driving this work and supportive of the use of restorative discipline practices. For administrators who want to increase and ensure the sustainability of restorative practices, (a) devoting resources such as circle starters, examples of successful circle topics, (b) creating time and space for using them such as modifying the school schedule to allow for a "morning meeting", or providing a physical space for private restorative chats, and (c) expressing their support for use of the practices not only in classrooms but also team or staff meetings such as public acknowledgement notes, or positive emails is imperative.

Let Peers Lead and Keep it Fun

Sustaining the implementation of restorative practices like circles also involves keeping the students interested and engaged. Like any activity for children and adolescents, if the practices are no longer fun, cause conflict or stress, or are too adult driven they will disengage or avoid the practice. In working with students to facilitate circles, providing structured, low-stakes lesson plans on topics they select and enjoy such as "my favorite song is" can increase participation and help ease student concerns or discomfort (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, & Espelage, 2016). Once students experience success in leading parts of circles, they will gain confidence and can progress to facilitate them on their own with adult supervision. Finally, when addressing serious topics, it is important that when the circle closes students feel heard and connected with the members of the circle. While serious topics such as "a time I had to let go of resentment was" can be difficult, sharing with each other in the circle as a supportive environment builds stronger peer-to peer and student-to-teacher connections.

Considerations of Diversity and Equity in Restorative Practices

Some argue that in order to truly implement restorative practices (i.e., the broader set of proactive, relationship-oriented strategies), schools must move radically away from punitive

authoritarian systems toward more egalitarian, democratic approaches to education (Bazemore &

Schiff, 2010; Cremin, 2010). Instead of taking an "all or nothing" approach, it may be useful to

take a slow grow approach and (a) shift to the use of restorative responses to less serious

unwanted behavior such as using inappropriate language, or (b) start pairing the typical punitive

discipline responses with a restorative practice such as a restorative chat. While building

momentum with these slow grow restorative practice strategies, administrators and teachers may

notice that students who have either received only a restorative response or those who received a

paired restorative response are less likely to repeat the unwanted behavior and are able to use

their newly developed conflict resolution skills as a replacement for disrespectful, or aggressive

behavior. Reducing overall exclusionary discipline by replacing it with restorative practices, or

reducing the repetition of the unwanted behavior that results in exclusionary discipline improves

equity and disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline that requires the persistent use of exclusionary

disciplinary practices.

Diversity "includes all the ways in which people differ, and it encompasses all the

different characteristics that make one individual or group of individuals different from another.

It is all-inclusive and recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that should be

valued" (https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#diversity; retrieved May 25, 2019). In

addition to race and ethnicity, diversity also includes culture, national origin, disability status,

sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, and language. Diversity also accounts for

varying perspectives and values. All of these differences can and should be considered when

planning and implementing restorative practices and conflict resolution in schools. In order to

make adaptations with individual and group differences in mind, schools must first work to get to

know their students well enough to identify and understand the specific differences.

There are three primary strategies for identifying and understanding diversity in schools, related to effective restorative practices and conflict resolution tools. First, educators should seek to establish and maintain strong relationships with students and their families. Many relationship building strategies including school activities, purposeful one-on-one time, and surveys or inventories could promote relationships across school and home. Second, schools could host diversity activities and celebrations allowing students to highlight and celebrate their diversity. Third, educators should seek to understand students and their families in the context of their communities by visiting and participating in local community events.

Once individual and group differences (diversity) are identified and understood, those differences can be incorporated into interventions to improve cultural responsiveness and effectiveness. Examples may include: (a) providing material translation or primary language discussions to reduce language barriers, (b) identifying matched peer and adult mentors and facilitators who most closely resemble and therefore relate to students with identified needs, (c) explicit and frequent reminders regarding safe spaces for discussions and reframing language in circles and mediations that may be biased or hurtful, (d) choosing peer mediation, community circles, or individual circles based on values and perspectives, and (e) strategies for students to identify common differences across the two peers in conflict or across a peer and adult in conflict.

Social Justice

Building upon identified diversity across individuals or groups of students, educators can also utilize restorative practices and conflict resolution to teach and promote social justice. Social justice work centers on fairness, equity, and inclusivity in relation to diversity by understanding the effects of historical events, systemic structures, and privilege on individuals and groups in the

minority and majority cultures. Social justice standards such as those provided by Teaching

Tolerance (https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-

06/TT_Social_Justice_Standards_0.pdf; retrieved May 25, 2019) can be taught explicitly and

integrated into restorative practices and conflict resolution interventions. Specifically, students

who are taught to be focused on actions and language that reflect inclusion, equity, and justice

may have (a) longer, more in-depth circle discussions, (b) use inclusive, non-biased language,

and (c) prevent and resolve conflict deeply rooted in differences when provided the tools to use

social justice in issues of conflict. These skills must be proactively and explicitly taught in order

for students to have the background knowledge and vocabulary to be able to analyze, understand

and identify issues of discrimination, bias, and unjust thoughts and actions underlying conflict

when it arises.

Student and Home Input

Restorative practices and peer mediated conflict resolution should include caregivers and

students in the planning and teaching phases. Without student and caregiver input into the

planning phase of implementation, educators alone may design ineffective or non-responsive

interventions. Students, specifically, are useful in the teaching phases of the new interventions

with caregivers being helpful in reinforcing these strategies in the home such as encouraging

caregivers to use affective statements mentioned above.

Strength-based Programming

Across all of these considerations, it is critical that educators, caregivers, and students use

asset, or strength-based practices, and minimize working from deficit constructs. This also

pertains to supporting students with disabilities, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

While students with deficits may require additional supports, strengths should always be

inventoried and interventions should be built on strengths, matched to student interest and ability. Restorative practices should be strengths driven, with a focus on the opportunity to build from what is present, and focused on developing mindsets that support solving problems internally rather than depending on external factors to solve individual problems. It is important to facilitate restorative practices from a strengths approach and to help students see their peers and conflict from a strengths approach. This asset based approach applied to restorative practices and conflict management will also help two students in conflict to shift their mindset from the conflict, to identifying what is right and good between them and their communities or groups and building on that to develop a plan based on hope and future-oriented thinking where both individuals and their communities benefit.

Conclusion

The benefits of utilizing students as guides for improving the relationships within their school community are numerous. In addition to developing invaluable skills for avoiding as well as addressing conflict in prosocial and healthy ways, students get to shape the environment that they learn in by making it an inclusive place for themselves, their peers, and their teachers to learn and thrive. This is accomplished through peer mediation delivered within a restorative practices framework where everyone is supported through the process of making amends and repairing relationships when conflict arises. In contrast to harmful exclusionary discipline practices such as out-of-school suspensions, restorative practices allow students to be included in the problem-solving process while gaining vital social skills, not excluded from the learning environment with no opportunity for skill development or relationship building. Although conflict will always be inevitable within our schools, communities, and homes, equipping students with the skills necessary for navigating such issues in their lives serves as an incredible

opportunity for education systems to set students up for the greatest successes in their

interpersonal relationships.

Tiers of Support	Explicit Social-Emotional Learning	Relationship Building	Conflict Management and Resolution
Tier 1	Instruction regarding theories of social order, conflict, and processes used to manage them Teaching communication, mediation, and other conflict management skills	Greeting all students at the door by name Circles to discuss student and teacher reactions to current events	Creating space for informal student and peer management of conflict Circles to develop classroom agreements or discuss reoccurring violations of them
Tier 2	Augmented instruction of specific social skills	Small group personal interviews Joint problem solving tasks	Restorative chats Responsive circles regarding particular incidents Peer-mediated self-management
Tier 3	Restitution activity aligned with function of unwanted behavior	One-on-one discussions and getting-to-know-you activities Re-entry planning	High-stakes restorative conferences Circles involving key community stakeholders

Figure 1. Restorative Practices in School Settings Across Multiple Systems of Support

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